

## **Semi-presidentialism: Concepts, Consequences and Contesting Explanations**

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## Semi-presidentialism: Concepts, Consequences and Contesting Explanations<sup>1</sup>

**Robert Elgie**

The science of politics is an inexact one. All the same, over the last 25 years, there have been some advances. The most important development has been the (re-)discovery that ‘institutions matter’. There are various more or less contentious manifestations of this realisation: historical institutionalism, sociological institutionalism, rational choice institutionalism and so forth (Hall and Taylor, 1996). However, what links these competing viewpoints is the belief that institutions should be treated as the most basic explanatory variable of political analysis. This is not to say that variables such as culture, ideas and interests do not matter. They do. It is merely to say that the study of political life should always include an institutional component. In this context, it is certainly the case that there is still a great deal of academic conflict and incoherence about the precise importance of institutions both generally and in particular cases. All the same, the demonstration that the study of political life is essentially incoherent without an appreciation of how institutions induce stability into an otherwise inherently unstable political process (Riker, 1980) is perhaps the most important step forward that political science has ever taken.

Within the ‘new’ institutionalist canon, the debate about the relative merits of different regime types is perhaps the most well known. The arguments about the supposed perils of presidentialism and the apparent virtues of parliamentarism are now

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very well rehearsed (Linz, 1990a; 1990b). Presidentialism is considered to be a potentially dangerous regime type because it is associated with competing claims of democratic legitimacy by both the executive and the legislature. There is an essential rigidity to presidential regimes that may weaken the mechanisms for dispute resolution. There is an inherent winner-takes-all logic to presidential elections. Finally, presidentialism, it is said, encourages populist leaders who may threaten the democratic process. On balance, this point of view probably still represents the academic consensus. That said, there is an equally well-known set of counter-arguments that have gained widespread support. Shugart and Carey (1992, p. 286) have argued that “properly crafted” presidential or premier-presidential regimes can exhibit advantages that overcome some of the major disadvantages of presidentialism. In particular, Mainwaring and Shugart (1997a, p. 469) have stated that “providing the president with limited legislative power, encouraging the formation of parties that are reasonably disciplined in the legislature, and preventing the extreme fragmentation of the party system enhance the viability of presidentialism”.

What about semi-presidentialism? Despite certain recent work (Elgie, 1999a; Roper, 2002; Siaroff, 2003), it is still the case that semi-presidentialism remains very much the poor relation in the debate about regime types. This is true both in the sense that there is less work on semi-presidential regimes than either their presidential or parliamentary counterparts and also because of the fact that semi-presidentialism has few advocates. In the main, Linz’s original view of semi-presidentialism still dominates academic thinking on the subject. He states: “In view of some of the experiences with this type of system it seems dubious to argue that in and by itself it can generate democratic stability” (Linz, 1994, p. 55). This judgement is echoed by Fabbrini (1995, p. 134) who states that semi-presidentialism “fails as a systemic answer to the dilemma of the two aspects of ‘good government’ [clear symbolic direction and effective implementation]”. In this context, the main proponent of semi-presidentialism in comparative politics is Giovanni Sartori. He states that he is not prepared to argue that semi-presidentialism is the best form of mixed regime type (Sartori, 1997, p. 135). Even

so, he does say that “the case *against* the two extremes, pure presidentialism and pure parliamentarism, is a strong one. By the same token I believe that the positive case *for* ‘mixed systems’ is equally strong” (ibid.). This is reminiscent of Shugart and Carey’s judgement about premier-presidential regimes cited above, premier-presidentialism being, in effect, a variant of semi-presidentialism.

The debate about regimes types – presidential, parliamentary and semi-presidential alike – is entirely consistent with the state of ‘new’ institutionalist body of work generally. On the one hand, there is now a much better understanding of the effects of adopting particular institutional arrangements than was previously the case. After more than a decade of in-depth research, there would, most likely, be little objection to Shugart and Carey’s (1992, p. 165) statement that “regimes with great presidential legislative powers are problematic, as are those in which authority over cabinets is shared between assembly and president”. In this regard, the study of political life has advanced in this domain at least. On the other hand, though, plenty of problematic issues remain. The aim of this review article is to identify and address some of these issues. In particular, three questions are asked: what is semi-presidentialism?; what is the focus of semi-presidential studies?; and what is the most appropriate explanatory variable in such studies? This article does provide some tentative answers to these questions. However, the main purpose is to highlight some of the most problematic issues in the study of semi-presidentialism. In so doing, it is hoped that the paper will make a contribution both to the study of semi-presidentialism and to the study of institutions more generally.

### **What is semi-presidentialism?**

The clear and unambiguous definition of concepts is an essential element of the exercise of comparative politics (Elgie, 1998, p. 220). This is particularly true for the debate about the advantages and disadvantages of regime types. In a recent article, Daly (2003) argued that the classification of democratic regime types has suffered from the

problems of parochialism, misclassification, degreeism, and conceptual stretching. These problems weaken the foundations of the assertions made by people like Linz, Sartori, Shugart and Carey and so on. After all, how can we reliably assert that presidential regimes are potentially problematic if we cannot be sure, or at least we cannot agree, how to define the concept of presidentialism?

The concept of semi-presidentialism has been particularly prone to definitional problems. Indeed, as one set of writers notes, in some areas there has been a “frequent disregard of the concept ...” (Bahro et al, 1998, p. 202). Most notably, there has been confusion, or disagreement, surrounding both the definition of the concept itself and, as a consequence, the list of countries that should be classed as semi-presidential (Elgie, 1999b, p. 2). In this context, it is possible to identify three types of definitions of semi-presidentialism in the literature. Each type of definition leads to different sets of countries being classed as semi-presidential.

The first type of definition of semi-presidentialism is one that considers only the actual powers of political actors, or, to put it another way, the relational properties of democratic regime types (Elgie, 1998, pp. 224-25). The best example of this type of definition is given by O’Neil (1993, p. 197 n. 4). He states that a semi-presidential regime is one where executive power is divided between a president and a prime minister, but where the president has substantial powers. From this type of definition, it follows that we can only determine which countries should be classed as semi-presidential by looking at the respective powers of the head of state and head of government, or by identifying, as O’Neil (*ibid.*, p. 179) puts it, “systems where the head of state wields real executive power over the prime minister and cabinet ...”. On the basis of this logic, the direct election of the president is irrelevant to the issue of whether a country should be classed as semi-presidential. Instead, for O’Neil, the list of semi-presidential countries comprises a number of countries in Central and Eastern Europe, including most of the successor states of the Soviet Union (*ibid.*, p. 197 n. 4), many of which would ordinarily be classed as parliamentary.

The second type of definition is one that combines formal constitutional arrangements with actual powers, or, more accurately, dispositional and relational properties (Elgie, 1998, p. 124). The best example of this type of definition is Duverger's standard formulation of semi-presidentialism. He states:

"A political regime is considered as semi-presidential if the constitution which established it combines three elements: (1) the president of the republic is elected by universal suffrage, (2) he possesses quite considerable powers; (3) he has opposite him, however, a prime minister and ministers who possess executive and governmental power and can stay in office only if the parliament does not show its opposition to them" (Duverger, 1980, p. 166).

According to this definition, the direct election of the president is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for semi-presidentialism. In order for a country to qualify as semi-presidential the directly-elected president must also be a relatively powerful figure. So, for example, in their study Stepan and Skach (1993, p. 9) identify only two semi-presidential countries (France and Portugal) and explicitly classify Austria, Iceland and Ireland as parliamentary because they have weak presidents, even though they are directly elected. Sartori adopts the same approach. He states that Austria and Iceland cannot be considered semi-presidential because their presidents "are strong only on paper, that is, are constitutionally given powers that the living constitution relegates to inaction" (Sartori, 1997, p. 126). Sartori classes Ireland as a parliamentary regime for the same reason.

The problem with both types of definition identified above lies in the fact that they include reference to relational properties. In so doing, they inevitably introduce an element of subjectivity into the classification process. They enable, indeed they encourage, different writers to identify different sets of countries as semi-presidential. However, this makes the task of drawing conclusions about the outcomes of institutional choices very problematic. For example, a writer who identifies France and Portugal as the only semi-presidential systems in operation in Western Europe may

justifiably conclude that there is an inherent flaw in semi-presidentialism because empirically these countries have experienced potentially destabilising intra-executive conflict. However, another writer who identifies not just France and Portugal but also Austria, Iceland and Ireland as semi-presidential would have to conclude on the basis of empirical observation that semi-presidentialism is predominantly associated with the absence of intra-executive conflict. Thus, the definition of semi-presidentialism matters because it determines the set of countries that can be classed as semi-presidential, which in turn determines the conclusions that can be drawn about the performance of semi-presidential regimes.

Against this background, as I have argued elsewhere (Elgie, 1998), it is better to adopt a third type of definition. This type of definition is derived from the dispositional properties of regime types alone. Without going over old ground, according to this logic a semi-presidential regime should be defined as “the situation where a popularly-elected, fixed-term president exists alongside a prime minister and cabinet who are responsible to parliament (Elgie, 1999b, p. 13). This type of definition requires no judgement about how powerful a president is, or can be. Indeed, as we shall see, the powers of presidents do vary greatly. Thus, it eliminates the essential element of subjectivity that is found in the first and second types of definition. In terms of comparative political analysis, this is an advantage. What it means is that it is easy to compare like with like because we can determine, and definitively so, the countries that can be classed as semi-presidential. (For a list, see Elgie, 1999a, p. 14). Thus, we can explore the effects of semi-presidentialism safe in the knowledge that case selection is not methodologically problematic.

The bottom line is that we need to be clear what we are talking about when we discuss the advantages and disadvantages of semi-presidentialism. A definition derived from the dispositional properties of regime types is the only type of definition that allows such clarity because it avoids the need to make subjective judgements. Thus, even though there is still confusion, or disagreement, as to how the term should be understood, it is argued here that semi-presidentialism should be defined on the basis

of the dispositional properties of regime types alone. In this case, the list of semi-presidential includes not just France and Finland, but Austria, Iceland, Ireland and Portugal too. Moreover, outside Western Europe semi-presidential countries include Bulgaria, Mongolia, Poland, Republic of China (Taiwan) and Ukraine.

### **What is the focus of semi-presidential studies?**

The confusion, or disagreement, about regime types is not confined to the debate about definitions. There are similar differences of appreciation about the focus of presidential, parliamentary and semi-presidential studies. Scholars diverge about what is being explained. All writers can now agree that 'institutions matter', but, as Hammond and Butler (2003, p. 147) put it, "it turns out that what 'matter' means has some significant ambiguities" and that, consequently, "the question of whether 'institutions matter' requires a considerably more nuanced answer than seems to be generally recognized in the neo-institutional literature" (ibid., p. 149). One part of this answer concerns the issue of what constitutes the focus of study, or, more technically, what constitutes the most appropriate dependent variable in the study of regime types. Different writers have focused on different aspects of the political process in this regard. In general, we can identify two types of dependent variable in the existing literature: regime survival, and regime performance. Some studies focus on both. Here, each will be considered in turn.

The first type of dependent variable is where attention is focused on the collapse or survival of the democratic process itself. This was the subject of the earliest works on regime types. For example, in his famous essay Linz (1990, p. 52) made the subject of his study very clear indeed: "A careful comparison of presidentialism as such with parliamentarism as such leads to the conclusion that, on balance, the former is more conducive to stable democracy than the latter". By the same token, in their rebuttal of Linz, Power and Gasiorowski (1997, p. 14) state that their article "tests hypotheses about the relationship of institutional choices and democratic survival by examining the



outcomes of 56 transitions to democracy in the Third World between 1930 and 1995". In this case, as in the others, the nature of the dependent variable is very clear.

As noted above, there has been less work on semi-presidentialism than on either presidentialism or parliamentarism. All the same, writers who have examined semi-presidentialism have also frequently focused on democratic collapse or survival as the main dependent variable. This was the focus of Linz's critique of semi-presidentialism, as the quotation towards the beginning of this paper clearly indicates (Linz, 1994, p. 55). More recently, Roper (2002) has discussed semi-presidentialism (or premier-presidentialism as he prefers to call it) in the context of whether or not semi-presidential regimes are conducive to democracy. Using the case study of Moldova, he concluded that "the flexibility of the premier-presidential regime can ultimately undermine the integrity of the entire political system" (*ibid.*, p. 269). By contrast, even though they do not go into great detail, Bahro et al. (1998, p. 207) state that the observation that "semi-presidential government is a form of government suited for political systems in transition seems even more pertinent to the new or newly democratizing states that have formed in recent years".

What links all of these studies is the focus on democratic collapse or survival as the dependent variable in the study. An advantage of such a focus is that the issue in question is extremely important. The collapse or survival of the democratic system is a 'big' issue. Indeed, there can be no 'bigger' issue in political life, or the study of political life. A further advantage is that the method of inquiry is straightforward. The task is to determine the statistical correlation between particular regime types and the presence of democracy. Such a focus, though, is not unproblematic. One disadvantage is that the issue is so 'big' that the level of analysis is, by definition, 'macro'. However, in political analysis the devil is very often in the detail. In short, no matter how advanced the statistical technique, even assuming there is one, it becomes very difficult to disentangle the precise effect of institutions from other macro features such as national wealth, political culture, colonial heritage and so forth. For this reason, a governance-centred approach (see below) may be less ambitious, but more appropriate. Another

disadvantage is that democracy-oriented studies run the risk of introducing a further element of selection bias into the process. For example, if we wish to know whether semi-presidentialism is conducive to stable democracy, do we focus purely on the experience of democratising or newly-democratised states, or do we include the experience of countries such as Austria, Finland, France, Iceland, Ireland and Portugal as well? In their work, Stepan and Skach (1993) often factor out OECD countries and countries that democratised before 1945. Equally, Power and Gasiorowski (1997) concentrate solely on democratic consolidation in the third world. On the basis of their case selection, both make judgements, albeit opposite ones, about the advantages and disadvantages of particular regime types. However, clearly the case selection matters.<sup>2</sup> If the analysis includes the experience of countries such as Austria, Finland, France, Iceland, Ireland and Portugal, then semi-presidentialism looks much more conducive to democracy than if the list merely contains, for example, the set of semi-presidential regimes in Africa. The bottom line is that the study of regime types frequently takes the collapse or survival of the democratic system as the dependent variable. Whatever the advantages of such an approach, the disadvantages are also patent.

The second type of dependent variable is where attention is focused on regime performance. Perhaps the most well known and certainly most ambitious project in this regard is the edited volume by Weaver and Rockman (1993a). In the introductory chapter to the volume, they state that one of their aims is to understand “What are the differences in institutional arrangements for governmental effectiveness, if any?” (Weaver and Rockman, 1993b, p. 5). By ‘governmental effectiveness’ they mean the “specific capabilities” (ibid., p. 6) of governments and they identify 10 such capabilities, including the ability to set and maintain priorities, to coordinate conflicting objectives, to make and ensure international commitments and so on. The basic point is that focus of study here is very different from the previous case. The question of democratic

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<sup>2</sup> It might be noted that part of Power and Gasiorowski’s (1997, p. 150) critique of Stepan and Skach relates to the purported case selection of the latter writers.

collapse or survival is not mentioned. Instead, the focus is on policy performance and governance.

In this regard, semi-presidentialism is once again the poor relation. In terms of governance-related outcomes the vast majority of work has focused on presidentialism and to a slightly lesser extent parliamentarism. Indeed, Roper (2002, p. 263) explicitly acknowledges that there has been “far less research on the institutional and policy outcomes of premier-presidential regimes”. To redress the balance, Roper himself focuses on the relationship between semi-presidentialism and cabinet instability. However, he asserts that cabinet instability is often associated with the breakdown of democracy (*ibid.*). Thus, his work is better classed as an example of a case where the dependent variable is democratic survival or collapse (see above) than as a case where it is essentially concerned with governability. In fact, the governance-centred work on semi-presidentialism is not necessarily found in the standard literature on the subject. For example, the literature on cohabitation<sup>3</sup> in France is extremely relevant to the study of semi-presidentialism in this regard, even if it is not explicitly focused on the advantages and disadvantages of semi-presidentialism as a specific regime type. So, Lewis-Beck (1997a; and 1997b) and Lewis-Beck and Nadeau (2000) have found that cohabitation affects the intensity of the economic vote. In particular, they have found that during cohabitation economic voting becomes more sophisticated. During these periods, voters believe that the Prime Minister, rather than the President, is responsible for policy making. This means that if their view of the economic situation is positive, they will disproportionately support the presidential candidate from the Prime Minister’s party or coalition, which may of course be the Prime Minister personally. Alternatively, if their view of the economic situation is negative, they will disproportionately blame the Prime Minister and/or the presidential candidate from the Prime Minister’s party or coalition. While this example does not focus on the policy

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<sup>3</sup> Cohabitation is the situation where a President from one party or coalition shares power with a Prime Minister from an opposing party or coalition.

effects of semi-presidentialism *per se*, it does make an explicit argument about the *de facto* effect of semi-presidential institutional arrangements on one aspect of the political performance.

There is some evidence that the focus of the debate about regime types has changed over time. In the early years of the debate the dependent variable tended to be democratic survival or collapse. More recently, though, there has been a growing tendency to focus on governance. This point would be of little more than historiographic interest if were it not for the fact that the focus of the debate matters. The judgements made about particular regime types are likely to vary as a function of the focus of the study. As Power and Gasiorowski (1997, p. 151) state: "Constitutional frameworks and party systems undoubtedly have important implications for public policy, economic performance, civil unrest and 'governability' issues, and the overall 'quality' of democratic life. But our research suggests that institutional variables may have a weaker impact on democratic *survival* than is commonly imagined" (their emphasis). Thus, in the same way in which the definition of semi-presidentialism prejudices the outcomes of political inquiry, so too does the choice of the dependent variable. Different definitions can produce different results. Different dependent variables can also produce different results.

In fact, the governance-oriented approach has now become the standard way of studying regime types. This is because such an approach provides the opportunity for a much more nuanced understanding of the political process. If a choice has to be made between adopting a democratic survival-oriented study or a governance-centred approach, then I would recommend the latter for this reason. That said, there are problems with such an approach. The main issue in this regard concerns the most appropriate version of the dependent variable. Should studies focus on economic issues like GDP, economic growth, or inflation? Should they focus on quantifiable or pseudo-quantifiable political issues such as cabinet stability, Freedom House scores for human rights, or the presence of divided government? Alternatively, should they focus on more qualitative political matters, such as political leadership, policy effectiveness, or

the quality of political life? Again, different versions of the dependent variable are likely to produce different results.

Overall, it is tempting to conclude that studies should incorporate as wide a range of dependent variables as possible. While it does suffer from a problem of selection bias in some regards, the Stepan and Skach (1993) article is exemplary in this regard. They look at the relationship between regime types and factors such as vulnerability to coups, legislative majorities as a proxy for successful policy implementation, and the duration of cabinet ministers as a measure of government stability. This, it seems to me, is the best way forward.

### **What is the most appropriate explanatory variable in semi-presidential studies?**

As we have seen, the choice of definition and the choice of dependent variable can dramatically affect the outcome of work on semi-presidentialism. Arguably, though, the most important issue in the study of regime types is the choice of the most appropriate explanatory, or independent, variable. After all, the basic aim of political science is to determine which arguments about political life are sound and which are not. While selection bias and/or the choice of an inappropriate dependent variable can clearly skew the judgements about such arguments, the choice of explanatory variable is fundamental because it is a key element in the process of causal inference (King et al, 1994, pp. 76). A whole range of explanatory variables has been proposed in the study of regimes types, including semi-presidentialism. In the rest of this section, I am going to ignore any non-institutional variables, such as political culture, economic wealth, demographics, colonial heritage and so forth. Instead, I will focus only on institutional variables. In this context, this section suggests that writers have tended to concentrate on three such variables: narrow institutional aspects of specific regime types, wider institutional aspects of the political systems, and general explanations of political life that are not necessarily derived from the features of specific regime types at all. Once

again, the argument is that the choice of explanatory variable matters and that there are problems associated with the choice of certain such variables.

The first type of explanatory variable is one that focuses on narrow institutional aspects of specific regime types, meaning the basic constitutional features of a system. The earliest work on regime types adopted such an approach. For example, in his work Juan Linz focused on what he believed to be the negative effects of the fundamental features of presidentialism. He defined presidential systems in a very straightforward way. He emphasised that such systems were associated with, firstly, a system of dual democratic legitimacy, whereby both the president and members of the legislature were directly elected, and, secondly, fixed-term elections for both institutions (Linz, 1994, p. 6). Having outlined these characteristics, he immediately went on to argue that most of the “problems of presidential systems flow from these two essential features” (ibid.). In other work, he made a similar point. His “basic claim” (Linz, 1990, p. 90), he said, is that “certain structural problems inherent in presidentialism make it likely that many presidential systems will run into serious difficulties of a sort that some parliamentary systems have successfully overcome” (ibid.). In short, Linz argues that the basic defining features of specific regime types cause, or at least strongly encourage, certain types of outcomes to occur.

At the risk of repetition, less work has been conducted on semi-presidentialism. Even so, the same logic can be found. For example, the Council for the Consolidation of Democracy in Argentina recommended that a semi-presidential form of government be adopted. The Council’s report stated that such a system “has an *inherent* flexibility which alternatively emphasizes presidential or parliamentary aspects, depending on the prevailing majorities in the congress” (quoted in Lijphart, 1992, p. 160 - the emphasis is mine). In a similar vein, Pasquino (1997, p. 129) has stated that semi-presidential systems “possess their own specific, appropriately devised institutional features”. Pasquino provides a specific definition of semi-presidentialism in which he outlines these features (ibid., p. 130) and he makes a passionate case in favour of semi-presidentialism by emphasising the beneficial outcomes with which, he believes, such

regimes are associated (ibid., p. 136-37). Using the same sort of language and logic as Linz and Stepan and Skach above, he states: "On the whole, under most circumstances, semi-presidential systems appear endowed with both more governmental capabilities and more institutional flexibility than parliamentary and presidential systems respectively" (ibid., p. 137). Again, the explanatory variable is clear. The basic constitutional features of a system are the ones that are said to determine political outcomes.

The main advantage of this approach is the simplicity of the focus. Are presidential regimes dangerous? Are parliamentary regimes better? Is semi-presidentialism a good compromise solution? These are fundamental questions. They are the questions that political scientists want to answer. They are the questions that decision-makers want political scientists to answer. An approach where the basic constitutional features of a regime type constitute the main explanatory variable allows the above questions to be addressed very straightforwardly.

The problem, though, is that this approach does not necessarily allow these questions to be answered very satisfactorily. This is because they fail to account for the variety of political practice within the set of presidential and parliamentary regimes. Presidential regimes do not all operate alike. The same goes for parliamentary systems. One recent article makes this point very clearly:

Parliamentary systems do not operate under a 'majoritarian imperative'; deadlock is not as frequent as supposed under presidentialism and is not absent from parliamentarism; coalition governments are not foreign to presidential systems and emerge for the same reasons as they do in parliamentary systems; decision making is not always centralized under parliamentarism and is not always decentralized under presidentialism (Cheibub and Limongi, 2002, pp. 175-76).

More formally, Hammond and Butler (2003, p. 148) have stated:

"for any two institutional systems, there always exists a preference profile which would lead the two systems to have similar or even identical policy equilibria. But for the same two systems there also usually exists a

preference profile which would lead them to have different policy equilibria”.

For writers such as these, the bottom line is that the degree of variation within each domain is so great that it makes little sense to talk of either presidentialism or parliamentarism as distinct institutional entities. Thus, the explanatory variable should not be derived from the supposedly essential institutional features of regime types.

This point applies not only to the debate about presidentialism and parliamentarism, but to semi-presidentialism too. In his founding work, Duverger focused very explicitly on the variation of political life within his set of semi-presidential regimes. Indeed, in his first English-language article, Duverger (1980, p. 167) spent relatively little time defining a semi-presidential regime and much more time outlining the “diversity of semi-presidential practices”.<sup>4</sup> In particular, within his set of seven West European semi-presidential countries he identified three with a figurehead presidency (Austria, Iceland and Ireland), one with an all-powerful presidency (France), and three with a balanced presidency and government (Finland, Portugal and the Weimar Republic). In my work too, I have focused on the variation in particular semi-presidential regimes (for example, Elgie, 1996; and 1999a). In the European context, I have distinguished between semi-presidential countries where there has been one dominant pattern of leadership; countries where there has been a shift from one dominant pattern of leadership to another; and countries where there has been no dominant pattern of leadership (Elgie, 1999c, p. 283). As a result of this variation, and on the basis of the logic outlined above, we should conclude that semi-presidentialism

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<sup>4</sup> I have made the point elsewhere (Elgie, 1999b, p. 9-12), but it is important to repeat the fact that Duverger argues that all of these seven countries are presidential, even though at least three (Austria, Iceland and Ireland) operate in a parliamentary-like manner. In other words, he does not say that these countries are parliamentary regimes. It is merely their political practice that is reminiscent of the practice in parliamentary regimes.



by itself cannot constitute a satisfactory explanatory variable. We should not talk about the 'essential' advantages and disadvantages of semi-presidential regimes as defined above. Instead, we need to consider other explanatory variables.

In this context, a second type of explanatory variable is one that focuses on wider institutional aspects of political systems. Weaver and Rockman (1993, p. 39) outline very clearly the logic behind this approach: "... institutional effects on government capabilities are not uniform, direct, or unidirectional; neither are they nonexistent. Institutional effects are real and significant, but often indirect and contingent". In other words, institutions matter, but the effects of any given set of institutions, such as a parliamentary, presidential or semi-presidential regime, are contingent. But what are they contingent on? In one sense, they are contingent upon everything, or almost everything. However, this does not help us. As Hammond and Butler (2003, p. 155) state: "Unfortunately, there exist few or no formal models of any political system's entire policy-making process, beginning with the voters and ending with some policy choice. The reason is that the number of variables involved and the relationships among all these variables, involving complex strategic interactions among the actors, are not adequately understood for most political systems of interest". What this means is that we have to simplify our analysis in order to make it tractable. All the same, as we have seen, we cannot simplify it too much otherwise we miss the degree of variation that can occur within a particular set of institutional structures. In order to square this circle, those who have written about regime types have tended to focus on the narrow institutional features of specific regime types plus one or two other fairly straightforward institutional variables. More specifically, they have often combined the basic institutional features of parliamentary, presidential or semi-presidential regimes with, firstly, the powers of political leaders in these regimes and/or, secondly, their party system/electoral system.

The most well known example of work emphasising the importance of presidential powers is the book by Shugart and Carey (1992). They measured the powers of directly-elected presidents (*ibid.*, p. 155) and concluded that "regimes with

great legislative presidential powers are problematic, as are those in which authority over cabinets is shared between assembly and president" (ibid., p. 165). Thus, for them, it is not presidential regimes narrowly defined that are problematic, but specific types of presidential regimes, namely ones where presidents have quite considerable powers in particular areas. The most well known example of an approach that emphasises the party system/electoral system is the work by Mainwaring (1993) and Mainwaring and Shugart (1997b). In his original article, Mainwaring (1993) illustrated the variety of political practice by identifying the different party systems that occur within and across regimes types. He then showed that there is a correlation between two-party systems and stable presidential systems and concluded that "the data suggest that the problem may not be presidentialism or multipartism so much as the combination" (ibid., p. 212).

These approaches have both been applied to the study of semi-presidentialism. The varying power of presidents, prime ministers and assemblies across the set of semi-presidential regimes has frequently been observed. In recent times, Roper (2002) has made this point. He measures the legislative and non-legislative powers of presidents in semi-presidential (or premier-presidential) regimes and confirms that they vary tremendously from one country to another (ibid., p. 260). He then explores the relationship between the different types of semi-presidential regimes and cabinet instability. He concludes that the "differences between premier-presidential regimes seem to have a relationship to institutional outcomes ... those premier-presidential regimes that are considered to be the most presidential have the greatest level of cabinet instability" (ibid., p. 269).

In fact, the most comprehensive study of this sort is the recent one by Siaroff (2003). His basic definition of regime types is based solely on dispositional properties as defined above. This leads him to identify a set of 41 semi-presidential regimes, including Armenia, Cape Verde, Croatia, Madagascar, Mozambique, São Tomé and Príncipe, as well as the more standard set of examples, such as Austria, Bulgaria, Finland, France, Ireland, Poland, Portugal, Romania and Russia (ibid., pp. 299-300). He then measures the powers of the presidents in each of these countries. Unsurprisingly,

he finds that the set of semi-presidential countries “has an enormous range and the highest standard deviation” (ibid., p. 306) of any of his categories. He then divides these countries into three sub-categories on the basis of the powers of their presidents (ibid., pp. 306-08). The sub-category with the highest level of presidential powers includes France, Georgia, Mali, Russia and Ukraine. The sub-category with the lowest level of presidential powers includes Austria, the recently reformed Finnish system and Iceland. The intermediate sub-category includes Bulgaria, Ireland, Poland, Portugal and Taiwan. In the end, the variation within this overall category of countries leads Siaroff to reject the notion of semi-presidentialism altogether (ibid., p. 309). In so doing, he provides a list of regime types that are derived from a mix of dispositional and relational properties, which is what he argued against earlier on in his paper. So, there is at least the need for him to flesh out the ultimate step in his argument a little more clearly. Even so, whether or not we choose to go the final mile and agree with Siaroff’s conclusion about the “shortcomings” (ibid.) of the concept of semi-presidentialism, he has provided a very systematic way of classifying both regimes and sub-types within particular categories of regimes on the basis of the powers of their presidents. The rigour with which he carries out his analysis is in contrast with certain other writers on the topic and for that at least he should be applauded.

The party system approach has been adopted most clearly by Duverger himself. As noted above, in his classic English-language article Duverger (1980) spends a considerable amount of time identifying the differences between the political systems of the seven West European semi-presidential regimes that he is examining. He then goes on to try to explain why these differences occur. He discusses the constitutional powers of the various political actors as well as the circumstances in which the regime was established. However, he places great emphasis on the importance of the parliamentary majorities in the countries under examination. He states: “In countries without a parliamentary majority, there is the greatest coincidence between the constitution and practice ... In the countries where coherent and stable majorities are normally found, there is a disparity between the constitution and practice” (ibid., p. 182). Thus, for

Duverger the party system helps to explain why the constitutionally powerful Icelandic president is in practice quite weak, while the almost powerless French president is often very strong.

To my mind, though, the main advantage of focusing on party systems as an explanatory variable is that it emphasises the dynamics within individual countries. Other analyses often miss this point. For example, even Siaroff's highly rigorous study of presidential powers leads him to imply that countries only operate in one particular way. On the basis of his analysis, if the power of the president changes, then it must have occurred because the set of presidential powers has been reformed. And yet, presidential power can vary even in the absence of constitutional or institutional reform. The party system can be the motor for such change. In Duverger's French-language work he develops this thesis much more systematically. (For an overview, see Elgie, 1996). In particular, he argues that presidential power is dependent upon the nature of the parliamentary majority, meaning whether or not there is one, and the president's relations with the majority, meaning whether or not the majority supports the president or is opposed to him/her (for example, Duverger, 1978, p. 120).

Overall, whether the emphasis is placed on the powers of political actors or the party system of particular countries, we are left with a much more satisfactory way of explaining why political systems operate in the way that they do than if we focus solely on the narrowly-defined constitutional situation of a given regime. The price we pay for focusing on a wider set of institutional explanatory variables is that we have to move away from the established terms of the debate about regime types. Originally, scholarly attention focused on the advantages and disadvantages of particular regimes. Which is best, presidentialism or parliamentarism? However, as Cheibub and Limongi (2002, p. 176) recently argued, "if parliamentary regimes have a better record of survival than presidential regimes, it is not because they are parliamentary". This may be a slightly paradoxical observation, but what they mean by it is that we need to consider more than just the effects of the supposedly 'essential' characteristics of particular regime types when examining the consequences of particular institutional configurations.

The third type of explanatory variable is one that focuses on general explanations of political behaviour that are not necessarily derived from the features of specific regime types at all. As noted at the beginning of the paper, the debate about regime types is a debate about the effect of institutions on political life. As a result, even though there is a discrete academic literature that deals explicitly with the institutional effects of presidential, parliamentary and semi-presidential regimes, at the same time there is also a wider body of work on institutions generally that is also more or less relevant to this specific debate. The best example of this approach is the work on veto players that has been pioneered by George Tsebelis (2002). In some respects, the conclusions of this approach closely resemble those of people like Shugart, Mainwaring and Duverger in that Tsebelis is primarily concerned with powers and parties rather than the supposedly 'essential' characteristics of regime types. The difference lies in the foundations of the veto players approach and the claim that it is applicable to the study of institutions generally. More than that, the veto players approach has profound implications for the very study of semi-presidentialism.

The veto players approach is an overarching theory of how political institutions operate. Tsebelis himself has applied it to many aspects of political life, including the study of the European Union and the structure of budgets. It has also been applied to the debate about presidential, parliamentary and semi-presidential regimes. Tsebelis defines veto players as "individual or collective actors whose agreement is necessary for a change of the status quo" (*ibid.*, p. 19). There are institutional veto players, meaning ones generated by the constitution of a country, and partisan veto players, meaning ones produced by the political game, such as parliamentary majorities. In this context, Tsebelis argues that each country has "a configuration of veto players" (*ibid.*, p. 2). This configuration affects the outcomes of policy, generating a greater or lesser degree of policy stability. The degree of stability depends on the number of veto players, the ideological distance between them and the extent to which they are internally cohesive.

The veto players approach has been applied to the debate about presidentialism and parliamentarism by Tsebelis himself (*ibid.*, pp. 67-90; and Tsebelis, 1995). There is

not the space here to outline the methodology that underpins Tsebelis work in this regard. Suffice to say that there are three steps to his approach (Tsebelis, 2002, p. 80): institutional veto players are located in a multidimensional space; the partisan veto players are disaggregated so as to identify the individual and collective players within them; and the so-called 'absorption rule'<sup>5</sup> is then applied, which means that some of the veto players can be eliminated from the analysis because they overlap with others. On the basis of this approach, Tsebelis echoes the previous criticism of the earliest studies of regime types when he finds that the same institutional framework can produce very different outcomes in different countries. He states: "political systems ... instead of belonging to two distinct distributions, form a continuum where similarities can be greater across than within systems. As a result, veto players theory challenges some traditional distinctions like presidentialism versus parliamentarism (ibid., p. 65). Instead, Tsebelis argues (ibid., p. 90) that in terms of veto players "there are similarities between presidential and multi-party parliamentary systems, and they contrast with single party governments in parliamentary systems". In other words, Tsebelis's conclusion is reminiscent of the one outlined earlier by Mainwaring (1993). However, the basis from which this conclusion is derived is very different and its implications for the study of presidentialism, parliamentarism and semi-presidentialism are considerable.

The main advantage of the veto players approach is that it is derived from a general theory of institutions. As such, it neatly illustrates the point that the debate about the institutional effects of regime types is indistinguishable from the more general issue of how we study political life at all. More specifically, the debate about how we should study semi-presidentialism is merely a specific example of a wider debate about how we should study political institutions. In this context, the main disadvantage, if indeed it is one, with the veto players approach is that it undermines the very subject

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<sup>5</sup> This is the condition under which "the addition of a veto player does not affect policy stability or policy outcomes" (Tsebelis, 2002, p. 12).

that has been the focus of this essay: the concept of semi-presidentialism. In the language of veto players, the concept of semi-presidentialism is redundant. Indeed, the same is basically true of any regime type. Tsebelis does make a general distinction between parliamentary and presidential regimes in terms of their agenda-setting characteristics, but, even here, agenda setting is the key issue for him not the regime type. For Tsebelis, the primary units of analysis are individual institutions and the ideological distances between them. Overall, the veto players approach is perfectly consistent with the general issues at stake in the traditional study of semi-presidentialism: institutions and their powers; political parties and the ideological distance between them. However, this approach also renders the concept of semi-presidentialism irrelevant. Therefore, the student of politics has to make a choice. What is the best way to study institutions? If the veto players approach is thought to provide the best way, then semi-presidentialism as a discrete topic of study is no longer appropriate. However, if the veto players approach is rejected, then the work of writers like Duverger and those who followed him is still entirely relevant.

## **Conclusion**

This review article has put forward four main arguments. Firstly, we need to be careful how we define semi-presidentialism. More specifically, we should define the concept with reference solely to the dispositional properties of regime types. We should do so because this eliminates the subjective element in both the process of defining semi-presidentialism and in the process of classifying specific countries as examples of a semi-presidential regime. Secondly, if we have to choose, then we should focus on a governance-centred dependent variable when studying semi-presidentialism. This is because such variables allow for a more nuanced appreciation of political life. However, combining a democratic survival-focused dependent variable with a governance-centred variable is perhaps better still. Thirdly, when studying semi-presidentialism we should avoid adopting an explanatory variable that is based on the basic constitutional

features of regimes. Instead, we should adopt a variable that focuses on the wider institutional aspects of the political system. Fourthly, we may choose not to study semi-presidentialism at all. The veto players approach provides an alternative way of studying political institutions and overall may provide a more fruitful method of analysis.



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